

OPINION

Organic Food and Nutritional Placebo Effect

Regarding the letters of Aug. 15 responding to my Aug. 6 op-ed "The Organic Industry Is Lying to You": Cameron Harsh denies that organic farmers use harmful chemicals. In fact, more than two dozen synthetic chemical pesticides are permitted in organic agriculture.

Why? Because "pure" organic practices are so primitive and inefficient that organic agriculture would be impossible without them. Even so, in a USDA study of 571 fruit and vegetable samples bearing the organic seal, 43% had detectable residues of prohibited pesticides. The classic article by UC Berkeley biochemist Bruce Ames and his colleagues found that "99.99% (by weight) of the pesti-

cides in the American diet are chemicals that plants produce to defend themselves."

Laura Batcha, another letter writer, claims that organic crops have "been grown and produced in ways that are the healthiest for ourselves, our families and our environment." Rubbish. A landmark study published in 2012 in the *Annals of Internal Medicine* by researchers at Stanford University's Center for Health Policy aggregated and analyzed data from 237 studies to determine whether organic foods are safer or healthier than nonorganic foods. They concluded that "organic" fruits and vegetables were, on average, no more nutritious than their far cheaper conventional counterparts, nor were those foods less likely to be contaminated by pathogenic bacteria. Moreover, because of organic agriculture's inefficiency and low yields, it is wasteful of arable land and water.

Recall the admonition of Agriculture Secretary Dan Glickman, when the first federal organic standards were issued in 2000, "Let me be clear about one thing: The organic label is a marketing tool. It is not a statement about food safety, nor is 'organic' a value judgment about nutrition or quality." That says it all.

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